PS 2742
.C5

1913

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

D382
.R78

Christmas-Night in the Quarters

By . . .

IRWIN RUSSELL

Christmas Night in the Quarters

Christmas-Night in the Quarters

BY

IRWIN RUSSELL

INTRODUCTION BY

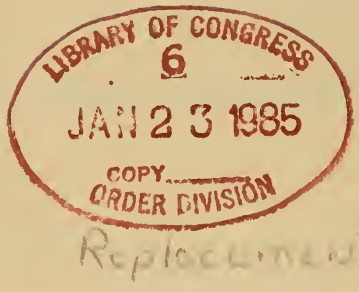
JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS

ILLUSTRATED BY

MARGARET DASHIELL

THE DIETZ PRESS, INC. • RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

PS2742
.C5
1913



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Irwin Russell, First Dialect Author

WITH Negro life and manners claiming the interest of novelist and playwright, will not the name of Irwin Russell emerge from the obscurity that has all but dimmed the fame of the South's pioneer writer of Negro dialect? With a constant stream of works bearing on the Negro issuing from the publishing houses, is it not safe to predict that the poems of Irwin Russell will no longer gather dust on library shelves, and that his well-defined ideas of Negro character will again find their way to the reading public?

Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris acknowledged their debt to Russell, and though Dubose Heyward, Roark Bradford, and Julia Peterkin have struck an original note in fiction about the Negro, no doubt they too would welcome the whimsical Mississippi poet of whom it was said:

"He couldn' a' talked so nachal
'Bout niggers in sorrow and joy,
Widdouten he had a black mammy
To sing to him 'long ez a boy."

Though not the greatest writer of Negro dialect in America, Irwin Russell was one of the very first to appreciate the true literary possibilities of Negro character and approach his subject with artistic fidelity. To him the Negro was not merely a ludicrous individual suited to caricature, but a well-defined personality, rich in humor and pathos, yet preserving his own peculiar traits in an alien environment. In order to realize just what were Russell's opportunities for observing Negro character, we must gaze back upon a somnolent little town in Mississippi during the years immediately preceeding the Civil War and the dreadful days of Reconstruction.

The town was Port Gibson, and here it was that Dr. William McNab Russell came to settle, bringing his young wife. And it was here that the Russell family greeted the arrival of Irwin, June the third, 1853. But the infant's sojourn in the "Land of Cotton" was

to be interrupted, for three months later Dr. Russell moved his family to St. Louis, a terrible epidemic of yellow fever having visited Port Gibson.

Dr. Russell was missed; indeed he had taken a prominent part in the social and professional life of the community. The dread scourge over, however, life became once more a pleasant affair in Port Gibson. Negroes lounged around the plantation stores, crops were discussed, affairs at the "big house" were noised about the slave quarters, while chuckling old "aunties and uncles" doled out bits of quaint philosophy.

Then came the affair at Fort Sumter, and every town and hamlet in the South felt the call to arms. Faithful to the land of his adoption, Dr. Russell returned to Port Gibson, and pledged himself to the Confederacy. Seven-year-old Irwin saw the preparations for war going on about him. The Negroes in the fields heard talk of freedom and equal rights, but they didn't quite understand it, so they went on with their singing. The lilt of these songs appealed strongly to Irwin's sense of rhythm, and before long he could rival them at their own game.

Reading was also a source of keen delight to the child; at the age of four he was often seen, book in hand, intent upon the exploits of some childhood hero. In the Russell household an atmosphere of culture prevailed, and before long Irwin had stumbled upon the English classics. He scribbled no childish verse, however, so his parents had no indication of what path he would tread in the future. His young acquaintances called him "the walking encyclopedia."

Irwin heard of the surrender at Appomattox Court House, but its only significance for him was that shortly afterwards his family removed to St. Louis once more. Here he entered the University of St. Louis, conducted by the Jesuit Fathers.

Russell was a studious young fellow, and though his taste for literature was marked in the extreme, he began to excel in mathematics. He read Chaucer and Percy's "Reliques", Herrick and the Elizabethan dramatists, and later, Burns, Byron, and Shelly. He once said: "Burns is my idol. He seems to me the greatest man that ever God created, beside whom all other poets are utterly insignificant. In fact, my feelings in this regard are precisely equivalent to those

of the old Scotsman mentioned in 'Library Notes', who was consoled in the hour of death by the thought that he should see Burns."

Like Stevenson, Irwin Russell was of a delicate constitution, and unable to find adventure on the high road, he sought in reading what the Scotch romancer strove for in his writings. Thus the sea tales of Marryat and the Indian stories of Cooper satisfied the boyish longing for adventure.

With a catholicity of tastes at variance with his slender years, Irwin savored the works of Smollett and Sterne, Fielding, Dickens, Thackeray, and finally Molière and Rabelais. In 1860 he graduated from St. Louis University, though there is no record of his having taken prizes in any subject.

Port Gibson had not changed perceptibly in the four years that Irwin had been away. The tempo of the little town had slackened a bit, for Mississippi had suffered greatly during the lean years of war, but the relations between the "white folks" and the Negroes remained unaltered. Though they had their freedom, many of the Negroes stayed on with their former masters, accepting what small wages could be spared them. The finances of the planters were at times little better than those of the "poor white", but with the racial pride characteristic of the South, the lines of demarcation were tightly drawn.

It was during this period that Irwin Russell first gave any consideration to Negro dialect as a medium of expression. "It was almost an inspiration" he said in a letter to a friend. "You know I am something of a banjoist. Well, one evening I was sitting in our back yard in old Mississippi 'twanging' on the banjo, when I heard our colored domestic—an old darky of the Aunt Dinah type—singing one of the outlandish camp meeting hymns of which the race is so fond. She was an extremely ''ligious' character, and, although seized with the impulse, I hesitated to take up the tune and finish it.

"I did so, however; and in the dialect I have adopted, which I then thought and still think is in strict conformity to their use of it, I proceeded as one inspired, to compose verse after verse, of the most absurd and extravagant, and, to her, irreverent rime ever before invented, all the while accompanying it on the banjo and imitating the fashion of the plantation Negro. . . I was then about sixteen,

and as I had soon after a like inclination to versify, was myself pleased with the performance, and it was accepted by a publisher. I have continued to work the vein indefinitely."

Though studious and contemplative by nature, Irwin Russell mingled freely in the social life of Port Gibson, and his gift for music and love of amateur theatricals made him always welcome. A born mimic of the plantation Negro, his "take offs" of the latter would keep his friends amused for hours.

A cousin described him thus at a somewhat later date: "His disposition was remarkably gentle, his voice low and musical, and his smile exceedingly winning, with an indescribable expression of sadness and resignation. His carriage was erect, with a slight stoop of the shoulder and inclination of the head; and he walked with a swinging gait, apparently gazing far off, his long arms dangling by his side. . ."

A talent for poetry, however, was not looked upon with great favor in the poverty-stricken communities of the South, and the Russell family was no exception to this dictum. Irwin was to study law.

Now, young Irwin also had a marked aptitude for drawing, so he frequently slipped out of Judge Baldwin's office, indulging in his own theories of art instead of filling his head with Mr. Blackstone's theories of the law. Or he would hurry to some printing he had in mind—he owned a small press and was keenly interested in typography. However, he did apply himself to his books, and having an extremely retentive mind he was able to pass the bar examination at the age of nineteen. The study of law was to give another literary talent to the world.

Another spring winged its way to Port Gibson, and yet another. The darkies sang merrily in the fields, and "Marse Irwin", so they called him since his return from St. Louis, was ever among them listening to their humorous sallies. Irwin had written his first poems for the local newspapers, and was already pointed out as the playboy of the little town. He was frequently seen in the company of a Miss Sally Massey, and before long it was noised about that Irwin was in love.

Summer with its picnics and frolics was over, and winter was

close at hand. Then came a red-letter day in Irwin Russell's life, a day fraught with meaning for American literature. Irwin was spending the Christmas holidays at "Greenwood", one of those charming old homes that have since become legendary in the South. From miles around neighbors had gathered for the mirth and revelry. But let one of the participants describe the rest of the scene:

"Something over half a century ago, Irwin Russell and others, myself included, attended a Christmas celebration at 'Greenwood', the delightfully pleasant home of Mr. Evan Jeffries, made doubly so by the cheerful words of old Greenwood's most charming inmates. On this never-forgettable occasion, Irwin Russell visited the Negro quarters with several friends to witness a Negro dance which was in progress, and there it was the thought entered his brain to put in verse his Negro dialect poem: 'Christmas (Night) in the Quarters.'

"During the wee small hours, when all had closed their eyes to dream of the pleasant Christmas just past; the talented author, genius and poet, Irwin Russell, sat all alone writing that immortal poem, 'Christmas (Night) in the Quarters.' . . . About dawn he rushed into our room where several of us were trying to get an hour's rest, with his usual pleasant smile, saying as he unfolded several scraps of paper, 'Boys, I want you to read something.' 'Hold a moment,' one of the boys interrupted, 'Have a toddy or an eggnog first.' Having quaffed the foaming glass, he wished us all the return of many more such happy Christmases, and then read the poem in question. We were pleased as well as amused, and advised that he put the poem in shape for publication, which he later did. . ."

It is upon this one poem that Irwin Russell's fame chiefly rests. In it one finds the humor, pathos, simplicity, religion, devil-may-care spirit, in fact all that distinguishes the Negro from his white brethren.

Can one soon forget "Brudder Brown's invocation to the Lord:

> "You bless us, please, sah, eben ef we's doin' wrong to-night;
> Kase den we'll need de blessin' more'n ef we's doin' right;
> An' let de blessin' stay wid us, untel we comes to die,
> An' goes to keep our Christmas wid dem sheriffs in de sky."

Has ever a more perfect picture of Negro temperament been planned?

Joel Chandler Harris says in his introduction to the collected

poems, (The Century Co., 1888): "His Negro operetta, 'Christmas Night in the Quarters', is inimitable. It combines the features of a character study with a series of bold and striking plantation pictures that have never been surpassed. In this remarkable group, if I may so term it, the old life before the war is reproduced with a fidelity that is marvelous. . ."

Northern magazines began to recognize Irwin Russell's talent, and the "Bric-a-brac" department of *Scribner's* published his earliest dialect poems. "Uncle Cap Interviewed", the first of these, appeared in January, 1876. Soon the attentions of H. C. Bunner, Richard Watson Gilder, and Robert Underwood Johnson were focused on the young Mississippi poet, and the name of Irwin Russell was being mentioned along with the contemporary Southern writers who were making literature.

At this period he said in part, writing to a friend: "In short it occurs to me to write a Negro novel. It is a thing entirely new—nobody has ever tried it. Negro lovers—Negro preachers—Negro 'literary and malevolent' 'cieties—Negro saints and Negro sinners—think of what mines of humor and pathos, plot and character, sense and non-sense, are here awaiting development! I shall take my little dibble and scratch away on the surface. Though I may not do more than strike 'color', I shall still work *con amore*. I will at least have all the advantages of opportunity—as I have lived long among the Negroes (as also long enough away from them to appreciate their peculiarities); understand their character, disposition, language, customs and habits; have studied them; and have them continually before me. . ."

In the midst of his literary success, Russell again began the practice of law, handling a number of important cases for his old employer, Judge Baldwin. Love had dawned once more in the heart of Irwin Russell. And this was the great love that every man meets but once. "The real love of Irwin Russell's life however, the one who stirred the depths for aye, was not Miss Sallie Massey, but a Miss Dora Donald," says one of the few surviving friends of the poet. "Bold, clever, glib and witty in the presence of other girls, with Miss Donald he was as timid as a schoolboy. It was to her he referred when in New Orleans and near the end he said in speaking

of himself: 'My life has been the romance of a weak young man threaded in with the pure love of a mother, a beautiful young girl who hoped to be my wife, and friends who believed in my future. I have watched them lose heart, lose faith, and again and again I have been so stung that I have resolved to save myself in spite of myself.—I never shall.'"

Then came the summer of 1878. A terrible epidemic of yellow fever raged in Port Gibson, sparing neither young nor old. Irwin Russell worked with untiring zeal nursing the sick and performing the sad offices for the dead. It was an experience that haunted his imagination during the short months to follow.

The following December Irwin Russell moved to New York, wishing, no doubt, to be in closer touch with the magazine editors. He was received with open arms by the men who had given him steady encouragement, and made a number of new friends. But withal, his stay in New York was fraught with sadness. The boyish spirit in him had been stilled by the ghastly scenes of the epidemic. His health, never of the best, was failing, and he began to indulge a craving for stimulants. The tragedy of his life was deepening. The father whom he idolized died from the effects of overwork the previous summer. No longer could Irwin sing of "niggers in sorrow and joy." He was sorely troubled in body and spirit. Then his health broke completely, and for long weeks he tossed in the delirium of fever. His friends nursed him devotedly, but one day during his convalescence he eluded them, found his way to the docks, and shipped on a vessel bound for New Orleans.

"Gaunt and weak and wretched as I was, they took me," Russell afterwards said in New Orleans, "and I did a coal-heaver and foreman's duty, almost all the way down. Landed here I had no money, no friends, no clothes. I was as black as an imp of Satan and had a very devil of despair in my heart. . ."

This was in the month of August 1879. Irwin Russell secured a position with *The New Orleans Times* where he was befriended by Mrs. Catherine Cole, a gifted newspaper writer of the eighties. In her reminiscences of Russell, the latter said: "It was my duty to make up the 'All Sorts' column, and for weeks at a time he would come daily into my den and scratch off a rhyme or two in inimitable

style for the top of my column, and which we wickedly credited to the leading poets of our land. He was gentle and genial, a fellow of infinite jest, and it was no wonder that 'he made friends wherever he went.' He was absolutely without hope for himself—even the wish for himself was dead long since—and it was inexpressibly sad to hear him speak of himself as of one already dead and all but forgotten by the world.

"One day, sitting cross-legged on the corner of the office table, he scribbled a last contribution for the 'All Sorts' column and then said 'Good-bye. You may not see me again. I fear I shall never look upon you.' It was a morbid, fantastic speech, but true, and Christmas Eve, a few days later, we went with our little wreaths of Christmas flowers down into the heart of Franklin street, a wretched, noisy, dirty neighborhood, where all that was mortal of poor Irwin Russell, mere senseless clay, lay in its coffin. . ."

Irwin Russell died in a shabby rooming house in New Orleans at the age of twenty-six! Irwin Russell, whose life like that of Keats had been a promise and a fulfillment. In the brief years of his career he had created a school to which Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and numberless other dialect writers belonged.

Thomas Nelson Page said in a letter to a friend after the poet's death: "Personally I owe much to him. It was the light of his genius shining through his dialect poems—first of dialect poems then and still first—that led my feet in the direction I have tried to follow. . ."

Irwin Russell, of whom the creator of *Uncle Remus* wrote: "He possessed, in a remarkable degree, what has been described as the poetical temperament, and though he was little more than twenty-six years old at the time of his death, his sufferings and sorrows made his life a long one. He had at his command everything that affection could suggest; he had loyal friends wherever he went; but, in spite of all this, the waywardness of genius led continually in the direction of suffering and sorrow. In the rush and hurly-burly of the practical, every-day world, he found himself helpless; and so, after a brief struggle, he died. . ."

Marse Irwin, who in the too few years of his life could write:

"We has no ark to dance afore, like Isrul's prophet king;
We has no harp to soun' de chords, to holp us out to sing;

But 'cordin' to the gif's we has we does de be' we knows,
An' folks don't 'spise de vi'let-flower bekase it ain't de rose. . ."

Or again, have old blind Ned utter this wise dictum:

"You's jes' like all musicianers dat learns to play by note;
You ain't got music in you, so you has to hab it wrote. . ."

Yes, stilled was the voice that could sing so merrily to the rollicking accompaniment of banjo. Vanished the smile that once heightened the shadows and lights of a sensitive face. In their stead lines of suffering and sorrow. . .

To those who appreciate the lasting quality of Irwin Russell's poetry, and who can pause a moment to condole with this sorely tried genius, the following lines will seem most fitting:

"An' I hopes dey lay him to sleep, seh,
Some whar' whar' de birds will sing,
About him de livelong day, seh,
An' de flowers will bloom in de spring. . ."

G. William Nott.

Introduction

THERE are books that are written and published with high hopes and ambitious longings, but this volume is in the nature of a memorial to its author. It represents the results of the brief literary career of Irwin Russell, of Mississippi, who was born at Port Gibson, Mississippi, on the 3d of June, 1853, and who died at New Orleans on the 23d of December, 1879.

He possessed, in a remarkable degree, what has been described as the poetical temperament, and though he was little more than twenty-six years old at the time of his death, his sufferings and his sorrows made his life a long one. He had at his command everything that affection could suggest; he had loyal friends wherever he went; but, in spite of all this, the waywardness of genius led continually in the direction of suffering and sorrow. In the rush and hurly-burly of the practical, every-day world, he found himself helpless; and so, after a brief struggle, he died.

Irwin Russell was among the first—if not the very first—of Southern writers to appreciate the literary possibilities of the Negro character, and of the unique relations existing between the two races before the war, and was among the first to develop them. The opinion of an uncritical mind ought not to go for much, but it seems to me that some of Irwin Russell's Negro-character studies rise to the level of what, in a large way, we term literature His Negro operetta, "Christmas-Night in the Quarters," is inimitable. It

combines the features of a character study with a series of bold and striking plantation pictures that have never been surpassed. In this remarkable group,—if I may so term it,—the old life before the war is reproduced with a fidelity that is marvelous.

But the most wonderful thing about the dialect poetry of Irwin Russell is his accurate conception of the Negro character. The dialect is not always the best,—it is often carelessly written,—but the Negro is there, the old-fashioned, unadulterated Negro, who is still dear to the Southern heart. There is no straining after effect—indeed, the poems produce their result by indirection; but I do not know where could be found to-day a happier or a more perfect representation of Negro character.

Joel Chandler Harris.

Christmas-Night in the Quarters

When merry Christmas-day is done,
And Christmas-night is just begun;
While clouds in slow procession drift,
To wish the moon-man "Christmas gift,"
Yet linger overhead, to know
What causes all the stir below;
At Uncle Johnny Booker's ball
The darkies hold high carnival.
From all the country-side they throng,
With laughter, shouts, and scraps of song,—
Their whole deportment plainly showing
That to the Frolic they are going.
Some take the path with shoes in hand,
To traverse muddy bottom-land;
Aristocrats their steeds bestride—
Four on a mule, behold them ride!
And ten great oxen draw apace

The wagon from "de oder place,"
With forty guests, whose conversation
Betokens glad anticipation.
Not so with him who drives: old Jim
Is sagely solemn, hard, and grim,
And frolics have no joys for him.
He seldom speaks but to condemn—
Or utter some wise apothegm—
Or else, some crabbed thought pursuing,
Talk to his team, as now he's doing:

Come up heah, Star! Yee-bawee!
  You alluz is a-laggin'—
Mus' be you think I's dead,
  An' dis de huss you's draggin'—
You's 'mos' too lazy to draw yo' bref,
  Let 'lone drawin' de waggin.

Dis team—quit bel'rin', sah!
  De ladies don't submit 'at—
Dis team—you ol' fool ox,
  You heah me tell you quit 'at?
Dis team's des like de 'Nited States;
  Dat's what I's tryin' to git at!

De people rides behin',
  De pollytishners haulin'—
Sh'u'd be a well-bruk ox,
  To foller dat ar callin'—
An' sometimes nuffin won't do dem steers,
  But what dey mus' be stallin'!

Woo bahgh! Buck-kannon! Yes, sah,
  Sometimes dey will be stickin';
An' den, fus thing dey knows,
  Dey takes a rale good lickin'.
De folks gits down: an' den watch out
  For hommerin' an' kickin'.

Dey blows upon dey hands,
  Den flings 'em wid de nails up,
Jumps up an' cracks dey heels,
  An' pruzently dey sails up,
An' makes dem oxen hump deysef,
  By twistin' all dey tails up!

In this our age of printer's ink
'Tis books that show us how to think—
The rule reversed, and set at naught,
That held that books were born of thought.

We form our minds by pedants' rules,
And all we know is from the schools;
And when we work, or when we play,
We do it in an ordered way—
And Nature's self pronounce a ban on,
Whene'er she dares trangress a canon.
Untrammeled thus the simple race is
That "wuks the craps" on cotton places.
Original in act and thought,
Because unlearned and untaught.
Observe them at their Christmas party:
How unrestrained their mirth—how hearty!
How many things they say and do
That never would occur to you!
See Brudder Brown—whose saving grace
Would sanctify a quarter-race—
Out on the crowded floor advance,
To "beg a blessin' on dis dance."

O Mahsr! let dis gath'rin' fin' a blessin' in yo' sight!
Don't jedge us hard fur what we does—you knows it's Chrismus-night;
An' all de balunce ob de yeah we does as right's we kin.
Ef dancin's wrong, O Mahsr! let de time excuse de sin!

We labors in de vineya'd, wukin' hard an' wukin' true;
Now, shorely you won't notus, ef we eats a grape or two,
An' takes a leetle holiday,—a leetle restin'-spell,—
Bekase, nex' week, we'll start in fresh, an' labor twicet as well.

Remember, Mahsr,—min' dis, now,—de sinfulness ob sin
Is 'pendin' 'pon de sperrit what we goes an' does it in
An' in a righchis frame ob min' we's gwine to dance an' sing,
A-feelin' like King David, when he cut de pigeon-wing.

It seems to me—indeed it do—I mebbe mout be wrong—
That people raly *ought* to dance, when Chrismus comes along;
Des dance bekase dey's happy—like de birds hops in de trees,
De pine-top fiddle soundin' to de bowin' ob de breeze.

We has no ark to dance afore, like Isrul's prophet king;
We has no harp to soun' de chords, to holp us out to sing;

But 'cordin' to de gif's we has we does de bes' we knows,
An' folks don't 'spise de vi'let-flower bekase it ain't de rose.

You bless us, please, sah, eben ef we's doin' wrong to-night;
Kase den we'll need de blessin' more'n ef we's doin' right;
An' let de blessin' stay wid us, untel we comes to die,
An' goes to keep our Chrismus wid dem sheriffs in de sky!

Yes, tell dem preshis anguls we's a-gwine to jine 'em soon:
Our voices we's a-trainin' fur to sing de glory tune;
We's ready when you wants us, an' it ain't no matter when—
O Mahsr! call yo' chillen soon, an' take 'em home! Amen.

The rev'rend man is scarcely through,
When all the noise begins anew,
And with such force assaults the ears,
That through the din one hardly hears
Old fiddling Josey "sound his A,"
Correct the pitch, begin to play,
Stop, satisfied, then, with the bow,
Rap out the signal dancers know:

Git yo' pardners, fust kwattillion!
Stomp yo' feet, an' raise 'em high;
Tune is: "Oh! dat water-million!
Gwine to git to home bime-bye."

S'lute yo' pardners!—scrape perlitely—
Don't be bumpin' gin de res'—
Balance all!—now, step out rightly;
Alluz dance yo' lebbel bes'.
Fo'wa'd foah!—whoop up, niggers!
Back ag'in!—don't be so slow!—
Swing cornahs!—min' de figgers!
When I hollers, den yo' go.
Top ladies cross ober!

Hol' on, till I takes a dram—
Gemmen solo!—yes, *I's* sober—
Cain't say how de fiddle am.
Hands around!—hol' up yo' faces,
Don't be lookin' at yo' feet!
Swing yo' pardners to yo places!
Dat's de way—dat's hard to beat.
Sides fo'w'd!—when you's ready—
Make a bow as low's you kin!
Swing acrost wid opp'site lady!
Now we'll let you swap ag'in:
Ladies change!—shet up dat talkin';
Do yo' talkin' arter while!
Right an' lef'!—don't want no walkin'—
Make yo' steps, an' show yo' style!

And so the "set" proceeds—its length
Determined by the dancers' strength;
And all agree to yield the palm
For grace and skill to "Georgy Sam,"
Who stamps so hard, and leaps so high,
"Des watch him!" is the wond'ring cry—
"De nigger mus' be, for a fac',
Own cousin to a jumpin'-jack!"
On, on the restless fiddle sounds,
Still chorused by the curs and hounds;
Dance after dance succeeding fast,
Till supper is announced at last.
That scene—but why attempt to show it?
The most inventive modern poet,
In fine new words whose hope and trust is,
Could form no phrase to do it justice!

When supper ends—that is not soon—
The fiddle strikes the same old tune;
The dancers pound the floor again,
With all they have of might and main;
Old gossips, *almost* turning pale,
Attend Aunt Cassy's gruesome tale
Of conjurors, and ghosts, and devils,
That in the smoke-house hold their revels;
Each drowsy baby droops his head,
Yet scorns the very thought of bed:—
So wears the night, and wears so fast,
All wonder when they find it past,
And hear the signal sound to go
From what few cocks are left to crow.
Then, one and all, you hear them shout:
"Hi! Booker! fotch de banjo out,
An' gib us *one* song 'fore we goes—
One ob de berry bes' you knows!"

Responding to the welcome call,
He takes the banjo from the wall,
And tunes the strings with skill and care,
Then strikes them with a master's air,
And tells, in melody and rhyme,
This legend of the olden time:

Go 'way, fiddle! folks is tired o' hearin' you a-squawkin'.
Keep silence fur yo' betters!—don't you heah de banjo talkin'?
About de 'possum's tail she's gwine to lecter—ladies, listen!—
About de ha'r whut isn't dar, an' why de ha'r is missin':

"Dar's gwine to be a' oberflow," said Noah, lookin' solemn—
Fur Noah tuk the "Herald," an' he read de ribber column—
An' so he sot his hands to wuk a-cl'arin' timber-patches,
An' 'lowed he's gwine to build a boat to beat the steamah *Natchez*.

Ol' Noah kep' a-nailin' an' a-chippin' an' a-sawin';
An, all de wicked neighbors kep' a-laughin' an' a-pshawin';
But Noah didn't min' 'em, knowin' whut wuz gwine to happen:
An' forty days an' forty nights de rain it kep' a-drappin'.

Now, Noah had done cotched a lot ob ebry sort o' beas'es—

Ob all de shows a-trabbelin', it beat 'em all to pieces!
He had a Morgan colt an' sebral head o' Jarsey cattle—
An' druv 'em 'board de Ark as soon's he heered de thunder rattle.

Den sech anoder fall ob rain!—it comes so awful hebby,
De ribber riz immejitly, an' busted troo de lebbee;
De people all wuz drownded out—'cep' Noah an' de critters,
An' men he'd hired to work de boat—an' one to mix de bitters.

De Ark she kep' a-sailin' an' a-sailin' *an*' a-sailin;
De lion got his dander up, an' like to bruk de palin';
De sarpints hissed; de painters yelled; tell, whut wid all de fussin',
You c'u'dn't hardly heah de mate a-bossin' 'round' an' cussin'.

Now, Ham, de only nigger whut wuz runnin' on de packet,
Got lonesome in de barber-shop, an' c'u'dn't stan' de racket;
An' so, fur to amuse he-se'f, he steamed some wood an' bent it,
An' soon he had a banjo made—de fust dat wuz invented

He wet de ledder, stretched it on; made bridge an' screws an' aprin;
An' fitted in a proper neck—'twuz berry long an' tap'rin';
He tuk some tin, an' twisted him a thimble fur to ring it;
An' den de mighty question riz: how wuz he gwine to string it?

De 'possum had as fine a tail as dis dat I's a-singin';
De ha'r's so long an' thick an' strong,—des fit fur banjo-stringin';
Dat nigger shaved 'em off as short as wash-day-dinner graces;
An' sorted ob 'em by de size, f'om little E's to basses.

He strung her, tuned her, struck a jig,—'twuz "Nebber min' de wedder,"—
She soun' like forty-lebben bands a-playin' all togedder;
Some went to pattin'; some to dancin': Noah called de figgers;
An' Ham he sot an' knocked de tune, de happiest ob niggers!

Now, sence dat time—it's mighty strange—dere's not
de slightes' showin'
Ob any ha'r at all upon de 'possum's tail a-growin';
An' curi's, too, dat nigger's ways: his people nebber
los' 'em—
Fur whar you finds de nigger—dar's de banjo an' de
'possum!

The night is spent; and as the day
Throws up the first faint flash of gray,
The guests pursue their homeward way;

And through the field beyond the gin,
Just as the stars are going in,
See Santa Claus departing—grieving—
His own dear Land of Cotton leaving.
His work is done; he fain would rest
Where people know and love him best.
He pauses, listens, looks about;
But go he must: his pass is out.
So, coughing down the rising tears,
He climbs the fence and disappears.
And thus observes a colored youth
(The common sentiment, in sooth):
"Oh! what a blessin' 'tw'u'd ha' been,
Ef Santy had been born a twin!
We'd hab two Chrismuses a yeah—
Or p'r'aps *one* brudder'd *settle* heah!"

Margaret Dashiell

In formal biographical notes Margaret Dashiell can never be captured. A characteristic of her own work sets the key, and any interpretation of her life, of her art, should be of suggestion, rather than in definite expression.

Surely her early environment played an exceptionally important rôle in her development, for to the influence of its contradictions her nature responded. Of distinguished English lineage her father, her mother Louisianan, she was born in New Orleans, and brought up there in a high-walled spacious house in the French Quarter. An only daughter, surrounded by every luxury, every care, she unconsciously absorbed all that the cultural background of an old régime could offer. To an Irish governess, whose lovely photograph she treasures, Margaret Dashiell no doubt owes much. From this wise and intuitive teacher she drew the haunting charm of ancient legends, the humour and poetry of an enchanting land. Much of that was later reflected in her paintings of New Orleans, which manifest subtle appreciation of superstitions and traditions ingrained in the daily life of a French Creole town. The foreign atmosphere of that town may throw light upon her deeply rooted feeling for the Roman Catholic Church, its ritual and ceremony ever appealing to her Protestant faith. Deeper still was its effect, for she has always carried into every battle life offered something of the traditional gaiety and gallantry of Old World France.

As a young girl scarcely grown, Margaret Dashiell, then Margaret May, came with her mother to Richmond. Here she married, and here for a long time she has lived, bound up in the city, in the lives of countless friends. She has become, in very truth, a native and Richmond claims her as its own. Varied has been her career, her interests ranging from active work under Ellen Glasgow's leadership in the S. P. C. A. (she often painted pictures in that cause) to wide fields of study and research. For years she dealt in fine prints and other works of art, thus extending her horizons to contacts with famous artists, with collectors, connoisseurs, among whom she could hold her own so broad her erudition.

A brilliant footlight illuminates her small, quaint "Serendipity Shop" on a side street. Mrs. Fiske loved to frequent it, and did so whenever playing at the local theatre. There, between matinee and evening performances, she would journey to lie on the sofa, to rest, relax, and enjoy conversation with a congenial companion, one well versed in lore of the theatre and aware of what great acting can mean.

Indeed that shop, guarded by the adored fox terrier, Philip, was a scene worthy of any stage. A visit there was an adventure, entrance into a fairy story. Seldom did any one, certainly never a child—Mrs. Dashiell's own small son may have created this insight—depart without a lagniappe, a tiny nickel image of St. Joseph in a case her favorite offering. How characteristic that she clung to that Louisiana custom, for to give is to her breath of life.

Circumstances forced the Dashiell family to many changes of abode. In each setting the same cherished possessions were rearranged to the delight and satisfaction of her friends. Impossible it was to associate her, with her eighteenth century French appearance and quality, apart from the priceless Buddha, the small della Robbia holy water stoup, the exquisite Chinese screen, the Buhl cabinet. Books galore there were, of course, and more intriguing still on the tables gay leather folders and scrap books, heavy with pictures, clippings, quotations.

From each new home there would at once begin to flow products of her brush and pen. Rare in substance are these jewel-like vignettes of Richmond, and in a few lines pen-and-ink drawings tell the tale with humour, tenderness and grace. Of a by-gone day always the themes?—Yes, some even dated from plantation life, but the technique, and this on Stark Young's authority, extremely modern.

The museums of Richmond in purchasing Margaret Dashiell's work give promise to the future. More and more will she be recognized as a social historian of the nineties, upon which period she concentrated. Into that all but vanished past one who can catch meanings out of the air reached and gathered much that might have been forever lost. Her unique studies, vivid genre scenes, frequently are depicted against backgrounds of authentic churches and houses of that era.

Through the magic of her art we see again the coloured people

of a far-off time. Her sympathetic understanding of that race is revealed in poignant reading of it. Here are gossips in the alley; there an old butler, directed by the mistress of the house, in preparation for a reunion, hangs a Confederate flag across a portico; drivers of country mule-drawn wagons peddle their wares up and down the quiet streets. Once more, in the parks and gardens, are nurses trundling babies in carriages under embroidered parasols, an infant in lace-trimmed robe, borne in arms, protected by a floating pale blue veil pinned to Mammy's shoulder, children in Mother Hubbard frocks, with curls, sunbonnets and wide hats, with skipping ropes and hoops, small boys with curls also, and Windsor ties, in sailor suits, playing with marbles and with tops. Veterans as gray as their uniforms, young women in widows' weeds, alert little pickaninnies—all move again before us in the flower markets, or on the sunny sidewalks of the town.

Valuable is this contribution, great the debt Richmond owes to an artist who held intact a rich tradition.

All honour to Margaret Dashiell!

Richmond, Virginia. ROBERTA TRIGG.

H 307 85

Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date: Oct. 2009

PreservationTechnologies
A WORLD LEADER IN COLLECTIONS PRESERVATIO
111 Thomson Park Drive
Cranberry Township, PA 16066
(724) 779-2111

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

HECKMAN
BINDERY INC.
JUL 85
N. MANCHESTER,
INDIANA 46962

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 015 871 508 9